June 1, 2012

Bill Passes House that Calls on VA to Address the Backlog

Washington, D.C. – Last night, in response to the reports of massive delays in processing veterans' benefits claims at the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Oakland regional office, the U.S. House of Representatives joined Congressman Jerry McNerney (D-Stockton) in calling on the VA to reduce the backlog and fix inaccuracies.

"I am glad that the House is joining me in demanding that the VA fix the problems at the Oakland regional office. Given that it has taken congressional hearings and repeated letters for the VA to start to take steps to correct them, the added attention will help to ensure that the VA makes good on its plan to reduce the backlog of claims. We must see the number of claims come down and mistakes reduced," said Rep. Jerry McNerney.

"I have said before, and I'll say again, that I will continue to hold the VA accountable for fixing the problems at the Oakland regional office. The additional pressure from the House of Representatives will help encourage the VA to stay vigilant in its efforts to quickly and accurately rectify the problems, utilizing all necessary resources at its disposal. The men and women who have defended our country and way of life deserve the best treatment we can provide for them, not frustrating and unacceptable delays in receiving the benefits they have earned," said McNerney.

The following language was included in the Committee Report accompanying the Military Construction and Veteran Affairs and Related Agencies Appropriation Act that passed the U.S. House of Representatives last night, putting further pressure on the VA to address the extreme backlog of claims.

Backlog at the Oakland, CA and other VA regional offices.--The Committee remains very concerned about the backlog of claims and accuracy of processing at Veterans Affairs Regional Offices (VAROs). For example, in May, 2012, the Office of Inspector General (OIG) submitted a report on the Oakland, CA VARO and found that it lacked effective controls and accuracy in

processing some disability claims. In addition, the OIG report found that the Oakland VARO management did not certify that the staff completed all elements of the Systematic Technical Accuracy Review (STAR), which is the VBA's multi-faceted quality assurance program to ensure that veterans and other beneficiaries receive accurate and consistent compensation and pension benefits. The Committee encourages the VA to follow the recommendations outlined in the May, 2012, OIG report for the Oakland VARO. The Committee also encourages the VA to direct necessary resources to address the backlog and provide a report to the Committee, within 30 days following enactment of this Act, detailing the efforts to eliminate the backlog and improve the accuracy of claims processing within six months.

Furthermore, the Committee is concerned that these problems are not limited to the Oakland VARO. The Committee is also aware of long delays in claims processing at the Houston and Waco, TX and Seattle, WA VAROs. Recognizing that the paperless claims system is designed to address the severe backlogs in regional offices like these, the Committee directs the VA OIG to conduct an analysis of the VA paperless initiative, including whether the paperless system has been tested with enough claims (original and supplemental) for the VA to be confident it is accurate and whether the VA's goals of eliminating the disability claims backlog and increasing the accuracy rate of processing claims to 98 percent by 2015 are still attainable. This report shall be submitted no later than 90 days after enactment of this Act.

Claims transformation initiatives.--The Committee is also concerned that several regional offices with the highest levels of backlogs failed to be included in the initial rollout of the `Claims Transformation Initiatives' and directs the VA to ensure that consideration of the size of each regional office's backlog is a primary factor in deciding which regional offices are slated for a `Claims Transformation Initiative'.